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ABSTRACT

The instructional practice of imitation works most effectively as a developmental and remedial instrument within a writing-centered, student-centered pedagogy. In this context, imitation can accelerate natural language acquisition and encourage language competence and control, thus enabling student writers to focus their attention on particular and personal writing problems, whether structural, material, or stylistic. Imitation need not violate the underlying principle of writing as a process (as argued in the "New Rhetoric"), since imitation can be implemented to remedy the student writer's particular writing problems as they appear in the course of writing in a "real" rhetorical situation. Analyzing and emulating models within such an environment introduces the inexperienced writer to the idea of "writerliness"--to the reality of a writer's choices and the relationships that exist between them, such as which persona to project, which experiences to tap, which purpose to execute, which audience to address, and which code to use. Nor does imitation violate the sense of writing as discovery, associated with a theory of imagination and cognitive development. Students must be allowed to discover for themselves a natural writing process while the teacher's task is to familiarize them with available options. By imitating a variety of models and internalizing the various language patterns, student writers become aware of alternative forms of expression and the struggling novice becomes an effective stylist and a thinking writer. (NKA)

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Imitatio Revisited:

Its Theoretical and Practical Implications Into the Twenty-First Century

In October of 1984, NCTE's Commission on Composition made public an unofficial update of its 1974 position statement for the teaching of writing. The issue of learning by writing was addressed under the heading of "The Means of Writing Instruction": "Students learn to write by writing . . .Textbooks and other instructional resources (i.e., workbook exercises, drill on usage, and analysis of existing prose," etc.) should be of secondary importance." This denunciation of "exercises" echoed that of the '74 decree. So what about the implications of the use of imitation in the teaching of writing? How is this technique distinct from general "workbook exercises, drill on usage, and analysis of existing prose"? Why, in fact, is imitation still present in composition classrooms in 1987, despite the NCTE's focus on learning to write by writing? The answer to the last question is simple and essentially dismisses the previous questions as well. Imitation--and I use the term broadly, not as a-rhetorical drill and exercise--works--and has for centuries--but not as the pedogogical focus of the curriculum. Rather,imitation works most effectively and efficiently as a developmental and remedial instrument within a writing-centered, student-centered pedagogy: developmental in the sense that the classical triad of ars, imitatio, and exercitatio (theory, imitation, and practice) is employed to speed natural language acquisition and to encourage language competence and control--oral and written; and remedial in the sense that the student-writers are able to focus their attention on particular and personal writing problems--structural, material, and stylistic.

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Imitation can be effectively introduced within the context of a "learning-to-write-by-writing" classroom to comply with the NCTE's position: such instruction need not, by necessity, be condemned as NON-natural. This is not practice for the sake of practice. Rather, imitation as an adjunct to a student-centered, language-centered curriculum may enhance language consciousness,may contribute to a student's awareness and sensitivity to language as an instrument for thinking, questioning, and communicating.

Even the most avid disciples of the "New Rhetoric," whether "neo-Romanticists" or "neo-Classicists," to be able to allow such imitative practice in the teaching of writing. It is permissible, even advisable, for one to learn to ride a unicycle or to play the violin or to pass a football, first by imitating the action and then by diligently practicing the "basics" of the procedure. It is by this sequence of activities that one becomes a unicyclist, a violinist, or a quarterback; practice makes perfect. However, learning to write by imitating another writer or by practicing the "basics" of composition too often invites accusations of aping a style or counterfeiting a structure or simply wasting one's time--accumulating a "bag of tricks." Instead of language acrobats we have language conjurers. Yet for centuries, students have learned to write by this method, but only now, in the face of the "New Rhetoric," is the practice of imitation in teaching writing being challenged. Still I maintain that the "New Rhetoric" and imitation are not antithetical, that the above accusations are not necessarily valid, that, in fact, imitation, seen as a developmental and remedial supplement and introduced intelligently and humanely into the classroom, accents and complements the "New Rhetoric."

The underlying principle of this "New Rhetoric" is the recognition of

writing as a process, actually composed of various recursive "stages" and ideally marked by teacher intervention in vivo rather than post mortem. Imitation need not violate this process approach to writing instruction; in fact, developmental and remedial imitative practice is an effective procedure for teacher intervention in-process. Imitation can be implemented to remedy the student-writer's particular writing problems as they appear in the course of the student's actual writing, given a rhetorical situation and a real, authored, context. Analyzing and emulating models within such an environment introduces the inexperienced writer to the idea of "WRITERLINESS," to the reality of a writer's choices and the relationships that exist between them--what persona to project, what experiences to tap, what purpose to execute, what audience to address, and what code to use. Immediately, the practice becomes relevant and applicable to the task at hand, hence more productive. The student goes beyond "What" to do, to "How" and "Why."

Associated with the "New Rhetoric's" principle of writing as a rhetorical process is the idea of writing as a means of discovery, as a strategy for exploring new material and determining and considering what material is already known, associated with a theory of imagination (a la Berthoff, Coles, Coleridge, etc.) and cognitive development (a la Perry, Piaget, Vygotsky, Kohlberg, Emig, Lunsford, Flower and Hayes, etc.).

Nor does imitation violate this sense of writing as discovery. Imitation can be generative. Internalizing various structures, developing a store of potential forms from which the student can draw as she writes, not only provides the opportunity for conscious stylistic choice, but also invites the use of constructions--for any length discourse--which can serve

as models for composition, providing familiar structures into which the student-writer can plug known and invented material. This description of the generative nature of imitative practice may at first seem prescriptive and formulaic, but I contend that being knowledge of workable forms contributes to student confidence in composition, freeing the student's communication of ideas. Rather than facing a blank sheet of paper with nothing to say and a due date quickly approaching, the writer, instead, has a knowledge of structure which creates a framework, a guide, for expression. (At least one of the worries is alleviated; the student has a way to communicate her ideas.) The blank sheet is not as discouraging once one has some kind of frame to put onto it, a frame which can then be fleshed out as creative composing occurs. The ideas belong to the student, but the format--and the approach--belongs to the ages.

Let me add at this juncture, however, that I am in no way condemning freewriting as a way into writing--I apologize to Macrorie and Elbow if it seems that way--, nor am I prescribing imitation as "the Way, the Truth, the Light." Rather, I maintain that as teachers of writing we need to be aware of the implications of imitation for encouraging invention and diminishing student apprehension and hesitation. A writing process is a personal investment. I've seen Gabriele Rico cluster her way to a Young Rhetoricians' Conference presentation. I've heard Edward P.J. Corbett admit that he no longer consciously calls up Aristotle's topoi as he writes. We are all aware of the protocols and analyses of the writing processes of students completed by Emig, Flower and Hayes, Graves, Odell, Perl, Pianko, and others. Our students must be allowed to discover a natural writing process for themselves. Our task is to familiarize them with available

options. Certain remedial and developmental students may find imitation effective in their writing processes. To insist on freewriting from some of these students might be a disservice. Imitative practice may be used to accent or extend a contemporary approach to writing instruction.

Strict imitation can be incorporated into a language-rich writing curriculum to remedy specific problems with the "tools" of composition--grammar (in all five Hartwellian meanings of the word), syntax, punctuation, organization, and development. A student who combines four sentence fragments and a run-on sentence to form a "cohesive" paragraph may be given a model to analyze and imitate so that he experiences what sentences are--how they fit together--and what a paragraph is. A student who has difficulty with commas after introductory elements may be given a series of sentences demonstrating this rule to be studied and emulated. A student whose essays and arguments are disorganized--in whose writings "A" is followed by "D," followed by "C," etc.--may be given a sample of <u>organized</u> prose to analyze and imitate. A student who writes only in generalizations may be given an example of <u>developed</u> writing to study and creatively replicate. Strict imitation can be fruitful in remedying particular writing problems.

Looser imitation, or a broader emulation of general forms, can also be incorporated into the teaching of writing as posited by the NCTE and the disciples of the "New Rhetoric." Knowing the "requirements" of an informative paper or a critical evaluative paper or an argumentative-persuasive paper may permit the student to express herself more freely. If the student-writer knows that constructing effective persuasive writing (or writing to any aim) requires her to do this, this, and this in a particular order, then the student can do whatever else she wants in the creative and personal development of her case as long as the general

rhetorical structure of the type of writing is maintained. The knowledge of potential forms simply directs the student-writer's thinking and gives method to his madness. A variety of models--professional and student essays illustrating particular aims--can be employed to introduce options within the mode, the organization and development of the examples analyzed by the student in terms of the inextricable bond between form and content. Knowledge of various strustures permits freedom of expression within known boundaries. Loose imitation--even parody--of general forms can be fruitful in the context of the composition class.

When the writer sits down to write, she must make several choices--in persona, experience, purpose, audience, and code. Handled in one way, the author's decisions may produce a masterpiece. Handled in a slightly different manner, the result may waver between mediocre and bad. Edward P.J. Corbett maintains that "there is an integral and reciprocal relationship between matter and form," an intricate balance between what is written and how it is written. It is this balanced relationship which determines appropriate style. According to the Rhetorica ad Herennium, "style is the adaptation of suitable words and sentences to the matter devised." Simply stated, "style," in Jonathan Swift's words, is "proper words in proper places." Contrary to what some profess, as Thomas Whissen remarks, "style is more than window dressing. It is not something spread over the content like frosting on a cake. Style is an integral part of content." By imitating a variety of models and subsequently internalizing these various language patterns, the student-writer develops the capacity for an effective writing style; the student becomes aware of alternative forms of expression, allowing him the freedom of consciously selecting the

"proper" structures for the particular rhetorical situation. The struggling novice becomes an effective stylist, becomes a thinking writer, one aware of stylistic choices.

Either type of imitation, or even a combination of both strict and loose imitation, can be incorporated into the "learning-to-write-by-writing" classroom with the end of enhancing the student-writer's awareness of, and sensitivity to, stylistic options as she composes and revises her writing. The student's internalization of various forms and structures for written expression, whether "creative" or "expository"--there's an artificial division--creates the opportunity for conscious writing with an understanding of the implications of the expression as reader-based prose; the writer is better able to perceive the effect of his projected persona, tapped experience, and selected code in communicating his purpose to the audience addressed. The novice writer becomes an effective communicator.

But imitation as a pedagogical technique must exist as an element within the writing program. For structural, material, or stylistic concerns, it is not a panacea. Endless exercises and drills may prove effective in improving writing for a short period--say, a week or so--but before long, the students begin to see such a-rhetorical practice for what it is, an excuse for writing. Their initial responses to seeing endless a-rhetorical exercises would be numbed dismay--automatonic student behavior within a traditional "circle of unbelief"--followed rapidly, however, by a spirit of revolution--and with good reason. The students lose all motivation to write, to discover, to communicate their own ideas; they lose all positive attitudes toward writing. What enterprising unicyclist wants to practice noting but getting up on the seat and maybe how to balance in

one place? What aspiring violinist wants to practice nothing but single notes or at most only scales? What ambitious quartrback wants to practice nothing but receiving the snap from the center, even if he occasionally gets the opportunity to drop back--as if to pass? Exercises or drills unrelated to the total activity quickly become futile. Students should not be discouraged in the process of writing by their fear of putting pencil to paper. They should not be frustrated in their writing because of the teacher's faulty instructional philosophy. Hence, real, authored, writing is the key to the teaching of written composition. Imitative practice is most effective as a developmental and remedial instrument within such a context.

In the not-too-distant future and perhaps even sooner, however, our profession in general, and especially our pedagogical approach to the teaching of writing, with its focus on the creativity and individuality characteristic of the "New Rhetoric," will be marked by the invasion of advanced technology--not Orwell's 1984, but rather "The Computer Age." With Wangs and Macs and Verbatim and Ram starts and disk drives and fiber optics and. . ., will imitation survive into the twenty-first century. . . can it? Computer-assisted instruction, programs and software already utilized experimentally at some schools and universities, announces a new age in teaching writing. Exciting graphics and multi-colored, multi-dimensional displays, joined with the sheer magnetism for space-age computers so common among students of War Games and Tron, mean that computers are a force to be reckoned with in the teaching profession, one to be harnassed, incorporated into existing programs. Even "drills" can be made exciting: imagine sentence-combining exercises in which the kernels

actually move around in front of the student's eyes; imagine stylistic and formalistic analysis and emulation of professional and student models in which the student-writer is immediately corrected if her imitation strays from the structure of the original; imagine computer programs which address the student by name, explain principles and exceptions, and congratulates her success in completing any remedial or developmental writing task, while the teacher is free to conference with other students during their invention and drafting of authored writing. These already exist.

But even with computer-assisted instruction, the key to the continued use of imitation lies in placing it still within the context of a "learning-to-write-by-writing" classroom. The computer is an invaluable tool for imitation--when effectively utilized--which can be abused, however, if its use in drilling students on matters of mechanics or structure or style is exploited. Instead, the computer and imitation must be considered as an alternative to inhumane "finger exercises," as a means of motivating student-writers to write and to practice their writing.

Teachers of writing--honestly seeking to improve their teaching effectiveness and diligently striving to improve their students' writing--must always remain abreast of pedagogical innovations and changing philosophical foci, must always be aware of what new is going on in the field. On the dawn of the "New Rhetoric" and computer-assisted instruction, the conscientious instructor must be open-minded and flexible, must be able and willing to evaluate and incorporate new and effective approaches to improving the quality of student writing into his teaching. However, that same conscientious instructor must be cautious when dispensing of old methods and principles of instruction in favor of the revolutionary and the

vanguard. If such capricious turnover occurs, imitation as an instructional technique may needlessly be abandoned--out goes the baby with the bathwater.

Through the twentieth century we have seen a renewed acceptance of this pedagogical method as a component of the writing curriculum. And I hold that this attraction and due regard for imitation need not vanish. I contend that this practice--with its roots in antiquity--can be blended with the "New Rhetoric" and facilitated by computer-assisted instruction to the end that imitation will survive the current paradigmatic revolution in the teaching of writing, that it will--considered conscientiously--be acknowledged as a complement to the revolutionary pedagogical innovations and changing philosophical foci that Maxine Hairston recognized in "The Winds of Change": writing as a recursive process with the teacher as writer and facilitator--and imitation in vivo; invention heuristics--as imitative techniques; a student's burdgeoning rhetorical awareness of the interaction of the writer's choices--through analyzing models; a holistic approach to a piece of writing--again developed through modeling; writing as discovery--with imitative class activities mirroring cognitive development and approaching linguistic maturity; and a consideration of a variety of modes of expression--also introduced by means of modeling. The old dog can be taught new tricks.

Is imitation "the sincerest form of flattery" as Colton remarks, or is it instead "suicide" as maintained by Emerson, or is it rather something in between, something paradoxical, perhaps? I lean toward paradox, not theoretically, but pragmatically. The implications of imitation for teaching writing are limitless, are flexible and adaptable to various philosophies of composition--old and new. But the truth is, some teachers

of writing are not so flexible and adaptable. Some condone and practice only the utilization of endless a-rhetorical "finger exercises," focusing exclusively on teaching the "basics" of composition, while others disavow any teacher involvement in student writing whatsoever, contending that endless "real" and personal writing--only--will improve self-expression. Those of us who train composition teachers or, for that matter, those of us who talk to other teachers of composition within our departments or colleges or communities have seen the former--those obsessed with Warriner's or The Harbrace Handbook, those determined to "purify" student writing at all costs, even by ordeal, those who would be driven to compose a "Beatitudes of a Fundamentalist," beginning "I am an English teacher who still marches to a distant tune. I consider myself to be a member of an endangered species; I belong to a vanishing breed. I am shadowed by my fellow language gurus." We have also seen the latter--those convinced that every word written or spoken by a student is a gem, an expression of self, a drop of blood which no one but the writer can truly understand; but it's OK because that's all that really matters anyhow. I view both of these approaches as pedagogically destructive: the first because there is total teacher involvement, the second because there is no teacher involvement. In the contemporary composition classroom, there must be a blending of the two approaches, an integration of the best of both worlds. This median would be the inclusion of imitative practice within the context of a student-centered, language-centered curriculum. Imitation is not a cure-all. Nor, however, need it necessarily be a self-defeating instructional technique. Here lies the paradox: the responsibility for handling this paradox lies with the creative writing teacher.